

Reflection on Sunday 21 September 2025

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(Gospel reading: Matthew 9. 9-13 – Jesus dines with Matthew and sinners)



The comfort of dining together

A funny thing happened to me the other day: I got out of a taxi and found myself in Istanbul. That wasn't surprising, because I knew, when I got into the taxi, that I was in Istanbul. But I'd fallen asleep for a few minutes in the car and, when it arrived outside my hotel, I momentarily forgot where I was. *Oh! Istanbul, oh yes.*

My wife, Jenny, and I were there for a few days on grandparent babysitting duty while our daughter attended a friend's wedding. This was my first time in Istanbul. I've been to Turkey before but never to the largest city in Europe; never to the point where East meets West. Over 12 million people live in Istanbul. It's a sprawling city that straddles the Bosphorus. Over 90% of the population is Muslim and, to me, it was full of surprises and awakenings.

After I got out of that taxi and went to my hotel room, I realised that I had dropped my mobile phone in the taxi. Disaster! I asked the hotel reception staff if they could help. There are 18,432 licensed taxis in Istanbul. They said that they would do what they could. And half-an-hour later, I got a call (hotel room phone, of course) asking me to come down to reception. There was my taxi driver, with my phone in his hand. The hotel staff had tracked him down.

I shook the driver's hand and said thank you and then, and I had to be careful how I said this, I asked him why he'd brought my iPhone 13 back, because he could have sold it for a lot more than the 1,0000 Turkish Lira I paid him for his taxi fare. He said: *Because I am a Muslim and I am honest.*

I had a conversation with a trainee Iman in the Blue Mosque and he explained to me that Muslims believe in Christ but only as one of God's many prophets. They believe in Abraham and Moses and the Old Testament prophets and in Jesus Christ, but only as messengers from God, sent every so often to remind the people that there is only one God and God's word is the truth. Mohammed was the last prophet, spreading this message.

This was told to me with such conviction that it really shook me; shook my faith. It sounded so plausible that it left me wondering: suppose this is right, and Christians have got it wrong? It was a scary few days.

The other part of Middle Eastern culture that I came to understand in Istanbul was how eating together holds a deeply significant place in society. Meals serve as more than just a daily necessity. The wedding that our daughter attended in Istanbul was a marriage between a bride of Iranian heritage and a man from Dublin. You couldn't imagine two more different cultures, but what brought the two families together was a lavish wedding dinner.

Meals in the Middle East are not simply about nourishment; they represent family unity, social connection, and the reinforcement of cultural traditions. The act of sharing food brings people together across generations, strengthens community bonds, and reflects the values of hospitality and generosity that are at the heart of Middle Eastern societies.

One of the most important aspects of eating together in the Middle East is the way it nurtures family relationships. Traditionally, extended families often live close to one another, and large family meals are common. Regularly gathering around the table creates a rhythm of connection, allowing family members to stay closely involved in one another's lives. During these meals, elders are given respect, and younger members learn values, stories and traditions through conversation. Eating together becomes a way of transmitting cultural knowledge, ensuring that customs and practices are preserved and passed down through generations.

Hospitality, a cornerstone of Middle Eastern culture, is also expressed most vividly through food. Guests are often treated with exceptional generosity, and sharing a meal is one of the

highest forms of welcoming others. The saying, "A guest is a gift from God", highlights the sacred role of hospitality, and communal eating underscores this principle. Meals are usually abundant, with more food prepared than necessary, symbolising the host's desire to provide comfort and abundance. Eating together thus becomes a ritual of trust and care, strengthening social ties both within the family and among friends, neighbours and even strangers.

In the Bible, meals are never just about food. They are about fellowship, acceptance and the breaking down of barriers. The act of eating together carries spiritual weight — it points us to the kind of community Jesus came to create. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is often found at a table. He eats with friends but also with strangers. In today's gospel, we hear how a casual conversation with a tax collector results in an invitation to dinner and one of the most influential gospel writers in the New Testament joining his band of followers. Welcome Matthew.

Dining with strangers is important because meals are places of vulnerability and connection. At the table, we slow down, we listen, and we share life. For a stranger, an invitation to dine says: *You belong here. You matter. You are welcome.* As Paul reminds us in Ephesians, by eating together, *we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but friends, we are God's people and members of his household.*

In our fast-paced, individualistic world, it is easy to close our doors and eat quickly alone in front of the TV, or only with those we know. But when we dare to invite strangers, neighbours or newcomers to share our table, we participate in something...

something almost holy. We are saying: *My home and my life are open to you. You are no longer a stranger.* And in that moment, walls of division crumble, and happiness rises, particularly if you're sharing a bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape 1952.

Seriously, in Istanbul I found that taking the time to talk to a taxi driver or a trainee Iman or a waiter in a street cafe, and when you share a meal or drinks with strangers from a different culture at a wedding, you realise that the barriers that you think are there because of what a few politicians and the newspapers tell you, they aren't. Ordinary people are more interested in enjoying good food in good company and handing back a lost mobile phone than they are in division. So, thank you God for the opportunity to visit Istanbul; thank you for the revelation that this provided. Amen.